

SCENES *from an interview*

Senator Mike Bennett

by Gus Mollasis



He is man who proudly served his country with four tours in Vietnam, but says it was nothing compared to what other soldiers did. Today, State Senator Mike Bennett serves his constituents in the 21st district with the same straight talk and clear thinking that helped him fall in love with the girl of his dreams, asking her to marry him just ten days after their first meeting. He's a man who has always known what he wants, for himself, his family and his country. Now, more than ever, he is still trying to make a difference in the lives of the people that he came to serve. Recently I sat down with him and we took a look at some of the scenes in an interview of his life.

Where were you born?

I was born in Brainerd, Minnesota. We came down to Sarasota in 1955 when I was ten years old. As the family story goes, "It was bad enough that we were poor, we didn't have to be poor and cold," so we came to Florida.

Paint me a picture of your childhood.

I had the greatest childhood you could ever ask for. My dad was the top hunting and fishing guide in town. I got my first fish when I was six and shot my first deer when I was eight. I thought I was living in the greatest time in the world. I was Tom Sawyer and I loved it.

Tell me about one of your first jobs growing up.

My first job was cleaning fish. My dad would tell the guys he

took out, "Let the kid clean them and just tip him something." They'd go to bar, and have a few and then come out and pay me money. To this day when I go out into the Gulf and fish, I still clean the fish. I love it. Back then we didn't know that we were poor, because everyone in the county was poor.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I didn't have many big dreams when I was growing up. I was a problem kid. I truly did graduate at the bottom of my class, number 351 out of 352 in Sarasota's class of 1962. I was in and out of trouble a lot. Judge Silvertooth suggested I go into the service. And back then when the Judge suggested something it looked like a pretty good idea. So I joined the Navy and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I did four trips to Vietnam. When I was back from one of my

trips in 1965, I met Dee on a Thursday night. A week later on a Saturday night I asked her to marry me. She said yes. I went back to Vietnam. When I got back, we got married and that was 44 years ago. I knew exactly what I wanted. The night I met her I told the guys I was with that I was going to marry her. Why she had anything to do with me, I'll never know. I wasn't Italian, Catholic or even a college graduate. Why she wanted to have anything to do with a crazy sailor, I'll never know.

Regarding business and development, what is the one thing that you are most passionate about?

To develop a way in the state of Florida, and I think we proved it with Hawks Harbor, where you don't have to pave over the state of Florida to have good growth. Lakewood Ranch, for example is absolutely beautiful with a lot of green space while preserving a lot of old Florida. I'm very proud that a couple years back, the sustainable communities of Florida gave me, as developer, a "best practices" award for my interest in the environment. They'd never done that with a developer before or since. I'm very passionate about helping people, but not with a hand out, but a hand up. I think everyone should have the opportunities I had. If you work hard and follow the rules, you can live the American dream.

Why is Florida and in particular the Gulf Coast still such a great place?

The bang for the buck, relatively speaking. We are a low cost place to live. We are low taxed with regards to our climate, beaches and overall job picture. As a place to raise kids or retire, its got the whole package.

What or who inspired you to get into politics?

Our workers' compensation was completely out of balance and it was in dire need of reform. I had an electrical contracting company and it was costing me more to provide workers' comp to my people for eight hours a day, five days a week, than it would to buy a major medical plan and cover them 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. I was spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on workers' compensation. I got mad and wanted to change it. I worked with Senator Dudley of Fort Meyers who helped me get the law passed that would allow at least some test (24 hour) coverage, which combined workers' comp and major medical for one premium. The bureaucrats out-waited us and even though it was the law, they made it disappear. I got mad and I don't like to complain

about something unless I'm willing to do something about it. After selling my company and five years of convincing my wife, I knew I was running and ready to get involved.

Finish the sentence – Mike Bennett is a good representative of the people because....

He cares about them all. I care about Republicans, Democrats, legals, illegals, rich, poor. I care about them all. I think I'm a good representative because you don't have to guess where I'm coming from. I'm blunt and I don't speak in riddles.

What are your feelings about the current climate in Washington?

The current climate in Washington is completely broke. How can we even be talking about raising the national debt limit when we are \$14 trillion in debt? Yet they are not willing to talk about decreasing spending. We pay \$1 trillion in interest to other countries. Think of all the things we could with that money, all the education programs, senior citizen programs, the infrastructure that could be helped, the things that we could build in our country if we were not paying someone else a trillion dollars. I find it disgusting that Washington is even thinking of raising the debt limit. I have admired Vern Buchanan and the first bill he introduced regarding the requirement of a balanced budget. That's what we need to do in Washington.

Will the new Congress listen to the people and really try to get what they want done?

They are listening, but the question is can the new people overcome the old, because the system in Washington is stacked against the newcomer because of seniority. There is way too much partisan politics with way too much labeling. The question is, can the tea party movement, whether Republican or Democrat, drive their message home – "Washington, we are fed up with you spending our great grandchildren's fortune."

The country and Florida are suffering massive job losses. What are some of your ideas that can get America working again?

We put money into banks with the stimulus. We needed to put it into projects, like they did back in the days of the great depression when they put money into building hospitals, schools, bridges and putting more people to work that way. Instead we gave the stimulus money to bankers so they would have bigger bonuses and that didn't do anybody any good. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

What is your overall energy position? Should we drill in the Gulf?

If we are going to create renewable energy, we should not be doing it on the backs of taxpayers. We should create energy zones that allow the Biomass plants to borrow the money from Wall Street and compete with FPL and TECO and sell that energy. If you own a shopping center you should be able to put solar on your building and sell power to everyone in your building.

The world is constantly in wars. You served in Vietnam. What did your time there teach you about your fellow man?

I had a good experience there. Remember while I served four tours in the Navy, flying on and off ships during the Vietnam War, it is not equal to 30 days with the average grunts in the field. They had it a lot rougher in 30 days than I did in four tours. It did teach me that the politicians are the ones that cause wars. The average soldier, he doesn't want to kill anybody and he doesn't want to be killed. He wants to feed his family and protect his country. Anytime that we have gone to war without being provoked or attacked, we are walking down a thin line because in the end we cannot be the savior of the entire world.

When are wars necessary?

Wars are necessary when you are trying to protect the weakest of the weak, or to protect your homeland, and when you are trying to overcome the mass slaughter or genocide of a people. Unfortunately, our wars don't happen for that reason. In Iraq and Afghanistan, it is all about money and oil. If it was truly about human rights, we would be down in the Congo.

If you had all the power in the world, what three things you would do to make America and the world a better place?

Attack renewable energy with the same gusto we did when we wanted to put a man on the moon. Once you are independent of foreign oil, you control your own destiny and money and don't have kids dying over there in the sand. I would also build up the military to where it was so feared and efficient, an entire country of the best equipped fighting force in the world. Then I would tell all those countries that we are not going to come and mess with your stuff unless you mess with ours.

Describe your religion, spirituality or your faith to me?

I do not belong to an organized religion, but I believe so

strongly in ones' ability to pray to your particular God whoever that is. I think that religious freedom is one of the greatest strengths in the world. The most spiritual people that I ever met were military chaplains. They were unique people, because at 8 a.m. they were the Muslim Imam, at 9 a.m. they were the Catholic priest, at 10 am, the Methodist minister, at 11 am, the Jewish rabbi. You never knew what religion they were. Their religion was not important. What was important was what religion you needed them to be. They were truly holy and spiritual men.

At the end of the day, what is most important to you?

My wife. The most important thing to me truly in my life is my wife. She's my soul mate, my buddy. We're married 44 years and she is still that same gal. I'm a lucky man.

What is the most important thing that a congressman or senator can do for his constituents?

Listen to them and be there. Have an open door. I don't think I've ever had my office door closed in Tallahassee.

Describe your perfect day or a typical day of your life?

I'm up early and out the door at 7 a.m. for a day full of meetings that would boggle most anybody's mind. When I'm home, I'm home. I like to sit back and cook dinner with my wife. We both cook. And I'm a fish cooking fool. And my perfect day is everyday. I haven't worked in 30 years, because I love what I do everyday.

What does the future hold for America? Are the best days ahead or behind us?

The best days are ahead but unfortunately we are going through a dip right now. We need to do something about the moral fabric of the country. We need more religion in the family, I don't care what that religion is. We just need more of it. We need to move away from political parties and activism to caring about the country and bringing the country together. With the tea party, it is a soft core rebellion that is simply saying, "Listen to us."

When it is all said and done, how do you want to be remembered?

I want to be remembered as the guy who tried. I had a few successes but more importantly, I had enough courage to try to make a difference. ☺